Operational Combat Stress and Suicide Awareness

Stress

- A normal part of one’s life.
- Defined as the experience of strain due to real or imagined conflicts, frustrations, and demands.
- Any demand on the mind or body is a type of stress.
- Natural reaction to everyday challenges.
- Can be either good (eustress) or bad (distress), helpful or harmful.

You’re Not Alone

Every Sailor routinely experiences a wide variety of situations that are potential sources of stress.

Causes of Stress

The causes of stress may be internal or external.

Internal

- Emotions
- Decisions
- Chemical
- Physical

External

- Family situations
- Dealing with other people
- Social or status change
- Environment and surroundings
- Work

Stress Skills

- Identify what is causing your stress.
- Develop effective strategies to increase your tolerance and manage your stress.
- Know your limits.
- Break down your goals into “do-able” chunks.
- Be aware of your attitude.
- Maintain a good sense of humor.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Consequences of Stress

- Physical
  - Examples: Headaches, heart disease/heart attacks, ulcers, hypertension, weakened immune system, digestive tract problems, chronic fatigue, insomnia.
- Emotional
  - Examples: Anger, depression, defensiveness, dependence, irrational fears and worries, hair trigger display of emotions.
- Behavioral
  - Examples: Withdrawal, impatience, poor problem solving, substance abuse, eating/sleeping disorders, negativity, irritability.

Combat Stress

- The mental, emotional, or physical tension, strain, or distress resulting from exposure to combat-related conditions.
- The net result of many STRESSORs
  - Fear of death
  - Fear of failure
  - Worry about what is happening back home
  - Uncertainty
  - Boredom
  - The many physical and mental demands of operational duties

Combat Stress

A normal response to an abnormal situation

Combat Stress

A natural result of heavy mental and physical work when facing danger under difficult conditions*

*1994 Leaders Manual for Combat Stress Control, U.S. Army

Combat Stress

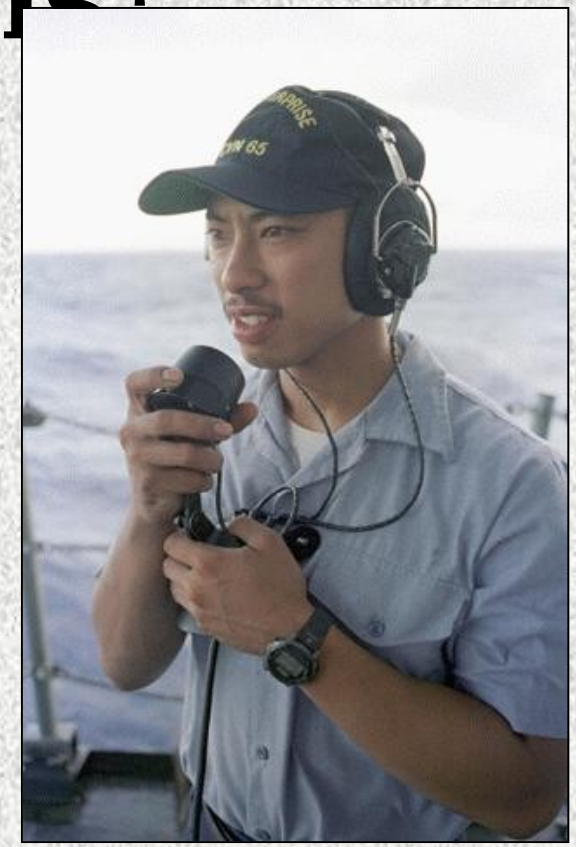
Combat Stress can happen to anyone!

Combat Stress Reactions

- Common, predictable, negative, emotional and physical reactions
- Interfere with mission performance or well-being
- Occur:
  - In war
  - In operations other than war
  - During peacetime training
  - During disasters

Combat Stress Symptoms*

- Hyper-vigilance
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Anger
- Grief
- Self Doubt



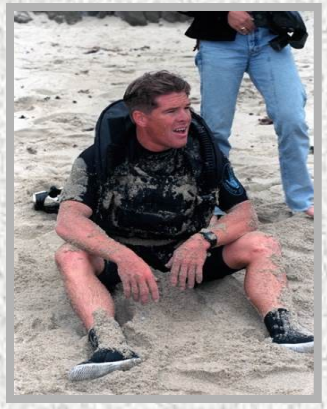
*From Field Manual No 22-51, U.S. Army, 29 Sep 94, Combat Stress Behaviors Leaders Manual for Combat Stress Control

Combat Stress Warning Signs

- Physical stress complaints
- Inattention, carelessness
- Loss of confidence
- Loss of hope and faith
- Depression
- Insomnia

Combat Stress Warning Signs Cont.

- Impaired duty performance
- Freezing, immobility
- Erratic actions
- Terror, panic
- Total exhaustion, apathy
- Loss of skills



Management-Restoration

(BICEPS) Six-step combat stress model

B revity – usually less than 72 hours

I mmediacy – as soon as symptoms are evident

C entrality – in a centralized combat stress unit separate from a medical unit

E xpectancy – expectations for recovery

P roximity – treatment nearest to where trauma was experienced

S implicity – the use of simple measures to treat combat stress such as rest, food, and reassurance

Treatment of Combat Stress

Three Effective Principles

PROXIMITY – Treat in close proximity.

IMMEDIACY – Treat as soon as possible.

EXPECTANCY – Treat with expectation of

normal recovery.

Treat Combat Stress With

- Reassurance
- Rest
- Replenishment
- Restoration

Treatment of Combat Stress Works!

- 80% of those treated returned to duty*
- If untreated, can become large wartime casualty and may lead to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

* Kentsmith D.K. (1986)

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- The essential feature is the development of characteristic symptoms following:
  - Exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury or other threat to one's physical integrity;
  - Witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person;
  - Learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm or threat of harm or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror
- Persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event
- Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma
- Present for 1 month
- Impairment or distress

Traumatic Events

- **Military combat**
- Sexual assault
- **Physical attack**
- Robbery
- **Mugging**
- Being kidnapped
- **Being taken hostage**
- Terrorist attack
- **Torture**
- **Incarceration as a prisoner of war or in a concentration camp**
- Natural or manmade disasters
- **Severe accidents**
- Being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness
- **Witnessing accident, death of another, violent assault on another**

Events May be Experienced in a Number of Ways

- Intrusive and recurrent recollections of the event
- Recurrent dreams
- Flashbacks. Experience disassociated states in which components of the event are relived and the person behaves as though he/she is experiencing the event at that moment (e.g., Vietnam vets relive combat experience).

Prevention of Combat Stress

- Strong leadership
- Leaders as positive role models
- Provide realistic and tough training

Prevention of Combat Stress

- Promote unit cohesion
- Promote unit morale and espirit de corps
- Educate about combat stress
- Physically fit forces

Prevention of Combat Stress

- Focus on mission and success
- Communicate – keep everyone informed about:
  - Expectations
  - Unexpected
  - Situation
  - Delays
  - Rumors

Prevention of Combat Stress

- Care for Sailors
  - Drink and eat
  - Sleep, sleep, and more sleep
  - Clean up
  - Keep busy (maintenance, and recreation if not resting)
  - Monitor for problems
- Debrief after hard actions and trauma

Combat Stress can be prevented and effectively managed!

Suicide

- Suicide is a tragic reality in our society and more specifically in the Navy.
- While the rate of suicides in the Navy is well below the national average, the loss of a shipmate or friend to suicide is a very painful, unnecessary, and preventable loss.
- In the U.S., Suicide ranks among the top ten causes of death across all ages.
- For 10 years, suicide has been either the second or third leading cause of death among active-duty Sailors.

Definitions

- Suicide is an intentional act resulting in one’s own death.
- Suicidal behaviors encompass a broad range of acts, including suicidal attempts, gestures, threats and suicidal thoughts.

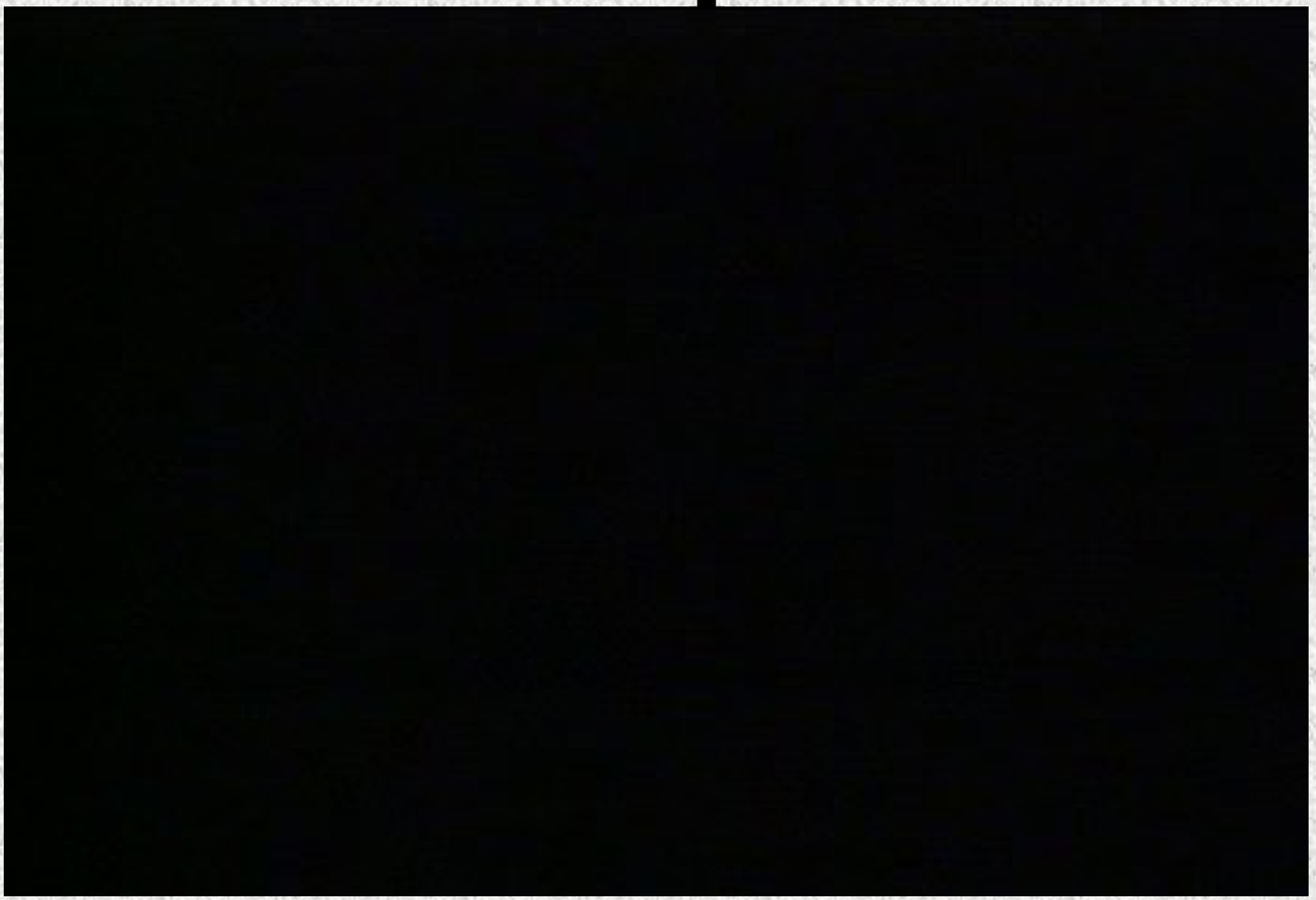
Definitions Cont'd

- Suicide attempt is an intentional act, causing self-harm, where death would have occurred without direct intervention.
- Suicide gesture is an intentional act suggesting a cry for help by causing physical self-harm or intending to cause physical self-harm. Suicidal gestures would not cause death if left unattended.

Three Key Risk Factors

- Mental health difficulties such as depression and/or substance abuse.
- Suicidal thought, which are often hinted at or discussed with others.
- Previous suicide attemp

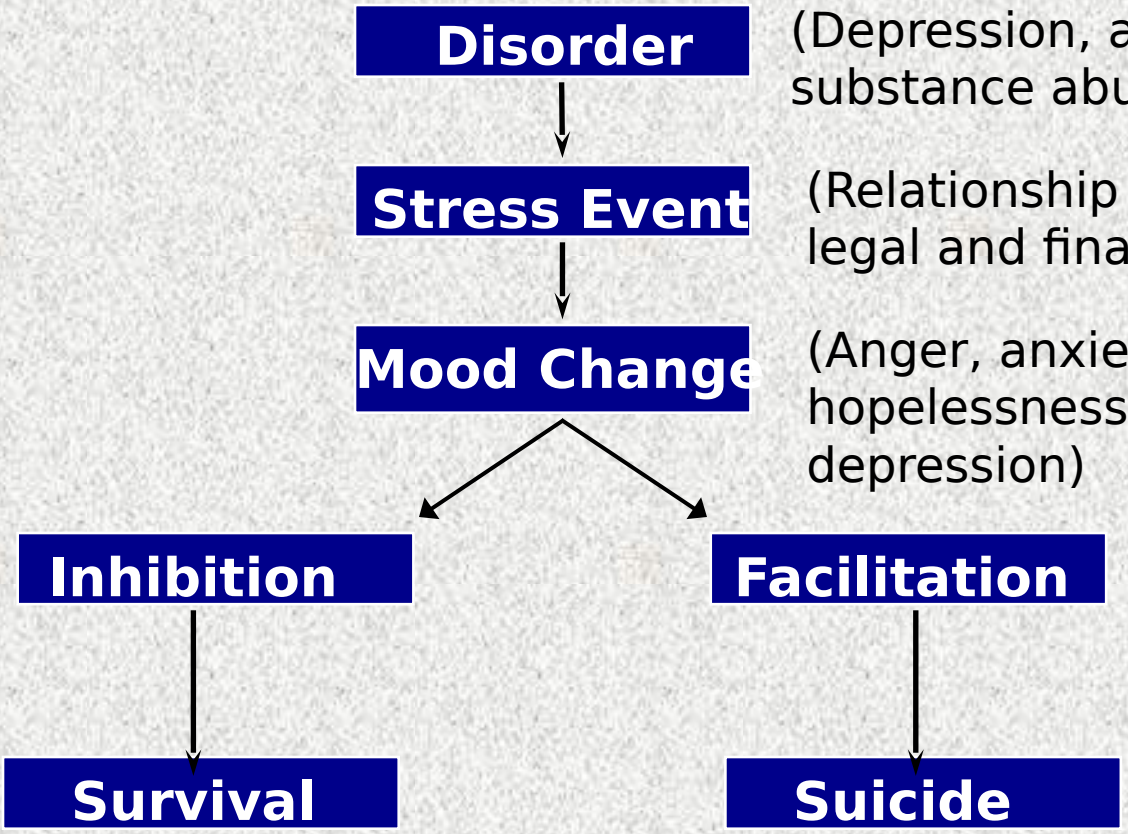
People at Risk Video Clip



Other Common Warning Signs

- Preoccupation with death.
- Giving away possessions.
- Relationship difficulties.
- Impulsive anger.
- Legal or financial trouble.
- Isolation or withdrawal.
- Performance difficulties
- Inability or unwillingness to connect with potential helpers.

Suicide Model *

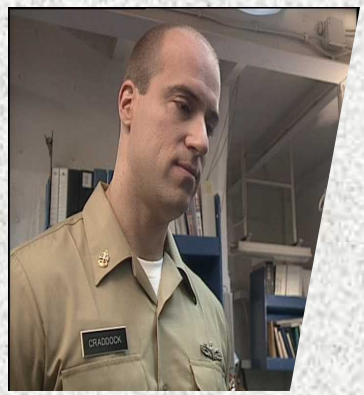


No access to method, no acceptance of suicide, support/ emotional expression, & seeks treatment

Access to method, acceptance of suicidal behavior, isolation, impulse, loss of close relationships by suicide, & avoid treatment

*David Shaffer, M.D., Columbia U.

Be A First Responder



- A first responder is a person who first recognizes the threat or risk of suicide and responds to prevent the possibility of a suicide.
- A first responder could be anyone - a supervisor, Officer on Duty, family member, Shipmate, coworker, friend, or YOU.

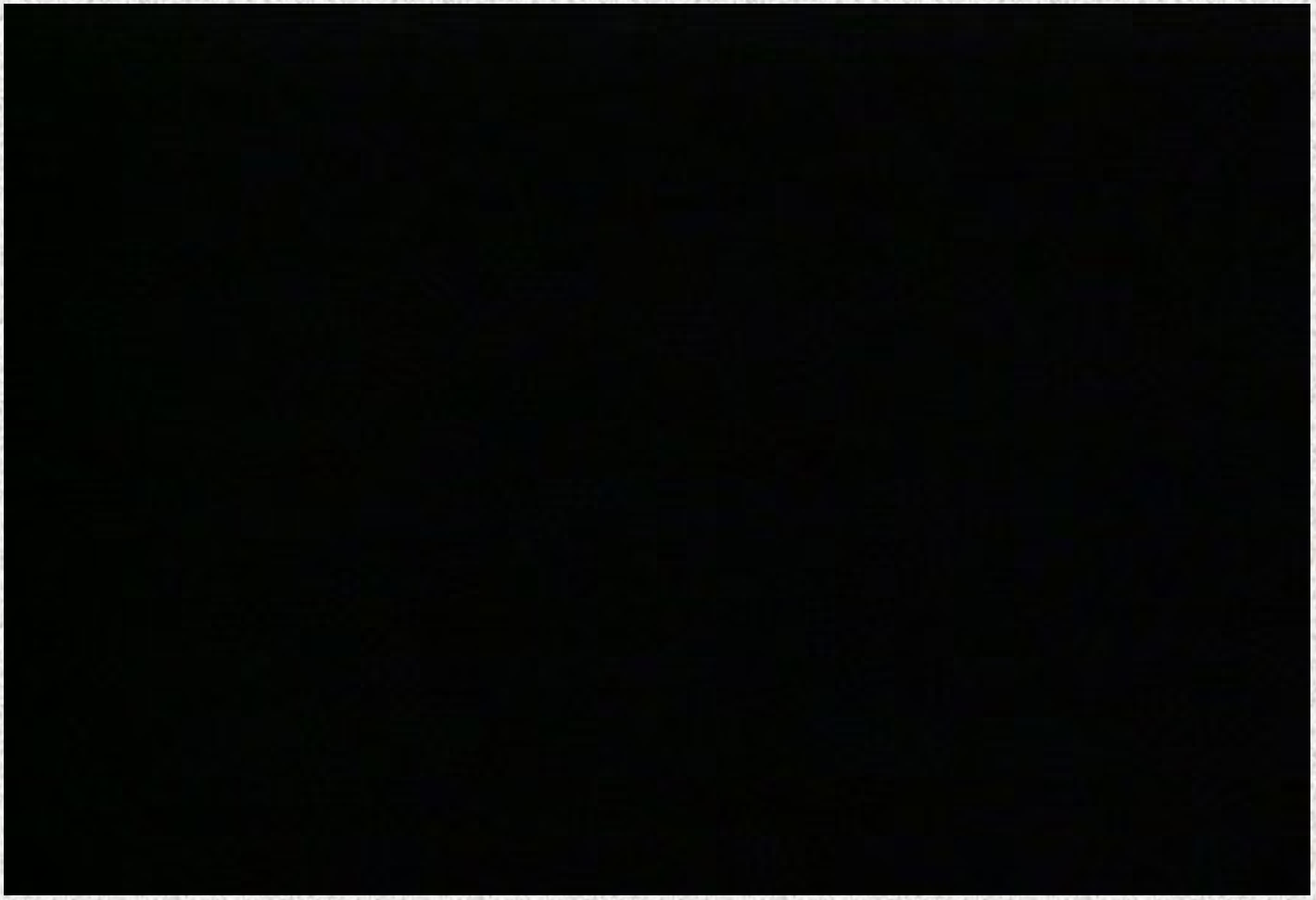
First Responder Duties

- Learning what to observe and the possible meanings of what is observed.
- Adopting an attitude that “I can help.”
- Understanding what to do.
- Knowing where to get professional help from resources in the military and civilian communities.

Helping a Suicidal Person

- Be direct.
- Be willing to listen.
- Be non-judgmental.
- Get involved.
- Don’t dare him or her to do it.
- Don’t act shocked.
- Don’t be sworn to secrecy.
- Offer hope.
- Take action.
- Get help.

AID LIFE Video Clip



Help Resources

- Command leadership
- Fleet and Family Support Centers
- Medical Services
- Chaplains
- Marriage and Family Counselors
- Substance Abuse Counselors
- Financial Advisors

HONOR COURAGE COMMITMENT

General Military Train ing Operational Stress

2-2-40

Summary

- Stress – Causes, how to manage it, consequences
- Operational combat stress – Signs, how to manage it, how to prevent it
- Suicide – Risk factors, warning signs, first responders
- Core Values

Testing

- To receive credit for this GMT lesson, you must take the post-assessment.
- The post-assessment can be found online at **http://www.navylearning.navy.mil/**
  - Select catalog, then FY04 GMT Required Topics Pre and Post Assessments.
  - Click on Add to Plan and then Launch to begin.
- If you do not have Internet access, see your command GMT Coordinator or Training Officer for the CD ROM version.

References

- SECNAVINST 6320.24A
- U.S. Public Health Service (1999) the Surgeon General's call to action to prevent suicide
- http://www.vnh.org/NHB/HW9539SuicidePrevent.html
- http://www.bupers.navy.mil/pers601/